

THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA
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Vol. XIV

May 1949

No. 4

JUN 22 1949

PLAYS OF TODAY

1944-1949

By

CORNELIA SPENCER LOVE



CHAPEL HILL

MCMXLIX

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CHAPEL HILL
THE UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA PRESS
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*Published six times a year, October, January, April, May, June, and July, by the
University of North Carolina Press. Entered as second-class matter
February 5, 1926, under the act of August 24, 1912.
Chapel Hill, N. C.*

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FOREWORD

The twenty-four plays discussed in this program are intended for reading and enjoyment, rather than profound study. They are important in that they are the "hits" of Broadway, the plays that ran for months—some of them years—to full houses and SRO (standing room only) during the past five years. As such, they reflect the play-going tastes and fashions of the times.

There are a few omissions which should be explained. The enormously popular *Harvey*, by Mary Chase—recounting the adventures of the gentle inebriate and his invisible white rabbit—has not yet been published in book form. In 1946 the Theatre Guild produced *The Iceman Cometh*, widely heralded as the first play in twelve years by our most distinguished and original playwright, Eugene O'Neill—defined by John Gassner as "one of the most imperfect of the theatre's great men, but it is folly to ignore his greatness because of its imperfection." Whichever side is taken in the fierce controversy waged over the merits of this play, it is universally acknowledged that it is one to be seen, rather than read—at least in public. It is so long, so dependent on the exposition of character through lengthy dialog, that it would be difficult to do it justice in a brief synopsis.

It has become customary in recent years for stage critics to say that the theatre is deteriorating, the good writers sold out to Hollywood, the audiences gone to the movies. It is true that the competition of moving pictures and the greatly increased cost of production have reduced the number of legitimate theatres in New York, and of plays annually produced. But within this program will be found such skilled and experienced playwrights as Maxwell Anderson, Elmer Rice, Moss Hart, John van Druten; such promising young writers as Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, William Wister Haines, along with the delightful operettas of Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers, E. Y. Harburg, and Alan J. Lerner. Variety is furnished by the actors-turned-playwrights, Howard Lindsay, Robert Morley, and Ruth Gordon; the English Terence M. Rattigan, and the earnest new team of Arnaud d'Usseau and James Gow. No five-year theatrical period which includes such distinguished names could be called unhealthy, or unworthy of comparison with any previous span of years in the production of plays of enjoyment and merit.

Attention is called to the following anthologies, which include not only the plays herewith listed—some of them in abbreviated form—

but practically all the plays of the past few decades that deserve preservation.

Following these is a list of critical books about the theatre, both entertaining and instructive, which are suggested to the program leader as a source of information and enrichment.

BIBLIOGRAPHY OF MODERN PLAYS

- Mantle, Burns, ed. *Best Plays of 1899-1909; 1909-1919* (\$6.00 each); *1919/20—1947/48*. (Annual volumes, plays summarized) Dodd, \$4.00 each.
- Gassner, John. *Best Plays of the Modern American Theatre*. 2 vols. 1939, 1947. Crown, \$4.00 each.
- The Pulitzer Prize Plays*. Random, 1940. \$4.00.
- The Theatre Guild Anthology*. Random, 1936. \$3.50.
- Hellman, Lillian. *Four Plays*. Modern Library, 1942. \$1.25.
- Odets, Clifford. *Six Plays*. Modern Library, 1939. \$1.25.

REFERENCE AND CRITICISM

- New York Theatre Critics' Reviews*, 1940-date. Issued in weekly numbers, containing reviews from the nine leading New York newspapers. Critics' Theatre Reviews, Inc., 235 E. 22d St., N. Y. 10.
- Sobel, Bernard. *The Theatre Handbook and Digest of Plays*. Crown, 1948. \$4.00.
- Gassner, John. *Masters of the Drama*. Dover, 1940. \$3.75.
- Freedley, George & Reeves, John A. *A History of the Theatre*. Crown, 1941. \$4.50.
- Freedley, George & Clark, Barrett H. *A History of Modern Drama*. Appleton, 1947. \$5.00.
- Nathan, George Jean. *The Theatre Book of the Year, 1942/43—date*. Knopf. \$3.50 & \$4.00 (Also see other books on the theatre by this noted critic.)
- Anderson, Maxwell. *Off Broadway; Essays About the Theatre*. Sloane, 1947. \$2.50.
- Young, Stark. *Immortal Shadows: A Book of Dramatic Criticism*. Scribner, 1948. \$3.00.

COMMAND DECISION—MISTER ROBERTS

Two fine plays have emerged from World War II, which seem worthy to be ranked with Maxwell Anderson's and Laurence Stallings' *What Price Glory?* as dramatic expressions of the two wars.

Command Decision is the first play of William Wister Haines, a young novelist who served during the war in the Eighth Air Force, stationed in England. Out of this experience he has written a tough, realistic melodrama, a fearless portrait of democracy at war which illuminates the human side but never loses sight of the fact that war is just the horrible, tedious, dirty business of killing.

The action takes place during a day and a half at the headquarters of an American Bombardment Division in England. The commanding officer, General Dennis, thinks that it is of the utmost importance to destroy three German factories engaged in producing jet planes. This can only be accomplished by daylight precision bombing, sending bombers out beyond fighter escort range, where they are clear targets for the Luftwaffe. And yet, if the factories are not destroyed the jets can soon ruin Allied air power.

Dennis has three strikes against him. He is tortured by the loss of men, hindered by his commanding officer—brass from the Pentagon—who feels that public opinion must be considered, and almost stopped by a pompous Congressman on an investigating junket. All these conflicting characters are excellently and sympathetically portrayed. The play, though powerful with masculine emotion, dispenses with sentimentality, and is lightened with a robust, salty humor. It is important in showing the enormous problems confronting a country, an Army, at war, before they go out to face the enemy.

Mister Roberts, a gusty, ribald, sentimental play much lighter in tone, nevertheless shows with equal force some of the hardships of war—its awful sameness, uneventfulness, boredom.

The action takes place on a small cargo vessel, plying between inactive islands in the tropical Pacific. The men never can get away from each other, which gives rise to scraps; they have no grown-up amusements, and so find vent in childish pranks. The captain is a hard-bitten sea bully who came up the hard way, hates college men, and drives his crew relentlessly, spreading misery and hatred throughout the ship. The men turn for relief to the young executive officer,

Lieutenant (jg) Roberts, a character delicately drawn in that he is of a simple purity, a sincerity, which makes itself felt without any bordering on the maudlin. He is eating his heart out for combat assignment, but the captain will not release him, knowing to what extent he is responsible for the ship's good record. How Roberts obtained a shore leave for the men, and how they outwit the captain and gain his transfer, makes up the plot of the play. Its enduring qualities lie in the story of men behind the lines of war, laboriously supplying the wherewithal for others to fight, the depiction of character—particular antipathies and loyalties—colored by their rowdy talk, funny without being forced, outspoken but never offensive.

The play was written by Joshua Logan, who also directed it, and Thomas Heggen, author of the novel on which the play is based. Henry Fonda, the screen star, gives a memorable performance in the title-role.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Command Decision*, by William Wister Haines.

Outline the plot.

Characterize the three leading figures, Dennis, Kane, and Garnett, showing how they developed in the course of the play. Do you think the author purposely introduced them as stern, if not hostile, to let their softer side appear gradually, thus winning the sympathy of the audience? Dennis, in particular, far from being the "Fascist Megalomaniac" they call him, is a man of great sensitivity and tremendous courage. Kane, through decades of fighting for adequate air strength, has learned the necessity of considering the press, Congress, and public opinion. Are you surprised by Garnett's actions, when he takes over the command?

Describe the minor, but hardly less important characters: Evans, tough and loyal, Brockhurst, the cocky war correspondent, Haley, Jenks Martin.

Does the play seem too talky, or does it project sufficient action to make it dramatic?

Discuss the advantages and disadvantages of democracy, as illustrated by the visiting Congressmen.

Dennis was withdrawn, owing to pressure from higher up, but only to be transferred to high command in the Pacific. The Air Force knows its fighting generals!

2. *Mister Roberts*, by Thomas Heggen and Joshua Logan.

Describe the Cargo Ship AK 601, its mission, crew, and life on board; its chief protagonists, Captain Harrigan and Mister Roberts. Does Harrigan seem too much the stock bully, or is he human and believable? Read the dialog between him and Roberts at the beginning of Scene 6, Act II.

Doesn't the play well illustrate the strain of war away from war? Some soldiers and sailors during the war were more shattered, spiritually and nervously, by duty removed from combat than were those actively engaged in it.

Outline the plot, showing Roberts' character—his simplicity, humanity, potential greatness in sincere need to dedicate himself to battle, even though—as actually occurred—it meant his death. (Did you not know just such a young man?) The crew's dependence on him and feeling for him. Read Act II, Scene 5.

Read—perhaps in abridged form—the Foreword by John Mason Brown.

Additional Reading:

Command Decision (novel); *Slim; High Tension*, by William Wister Haines.

Mister Roberts (novel), by Thomas Heggen.

Winged Victory; the Army Air Forces Play, by Moss Hart.

Jacobowsky and the Colonel, by Franz Werfel.

A Bell For Adano, by Paul Osborn.

CHAPTER II

THE VOICE OF THE TURTLE—I REMEMBER MAMA

"The flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing of birds is come, and the voice of the turtle is heard in our land." John van Druten took the title for his most successful play from the *Song of Solomon*, as did Lillian Hellman for *The Little Foxes*. The turtle dove's voice sounds forth in a smallish apartment, inhabited by Sally Middleton, a charming young actress who is trying to get over a love affair with a producer. Her friend Olive brings an Army sergeant to the apartment, and then, with a chance for a better date, leaves him there. He stays for the week end.

Since there are only three in the cast—and one of these appears only in the first and last acts—the demands on the other two are heavy. Sally is somewhat worried about her life, domestic—she came from Joplin, Mo.—yet hoping some day to get a leading part. Bill, the sergeant, has been around. He knows a nice girl when he sees her, but at the same time is practical about it. Before the end the girls have a set-to about him, all delightfully human and funny. In fact, those two words well describe the play. The young couple, in spite of their actions, are so truly understandable and nice, and their love-making so convincing, involved though it is with eating and drinking and house-keeping details. Neither of them wants to have any sentiment mixed in (Sally: "We must keep this gay!") for both of them have been hurt by love. But at the last curtain they have decided "This is heaven."

John van Druten, who has been called "one of the most ingenious and skilful technicians now writing for the theatre," shows his versatility in his next production, *I Remember Mama*, which is adapted from a book by Kathryn Forbes, *Mama's Bank Account*. This is a fond and beguiling play, episodic in form, about a Norwegian-American family living in San Francisco in the early years of this century. It is made up of many small, unimportant things—a young girl having her first cup of coffee, a little boy being taught lovingly to swear, a bashful bridegroom hinting for a dowry. In every emergency the resourceful and self-sacrificing Mama is always there. When little Dagmar is in the hospital, Mama gets to see her by posing as a scrub-woman. When the crusty Uncle Chris is dying Mama pours his final glass of whisky, and when the discouraged Katrin gives up, in her am-

bition to be an author, it is Mama who descends upon a famous woman writer in her daughter's behalf.

It is the sort of play from which the audience departs with eyes wet with refreshing tears, and a feeling of warmth around the heart.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *The Voice of the Turtle*, by John van Druten.

Either give an outline of the play, describing the characters, and reading parts of the dialog, or select three good readers, rehearse them, and let them take the parts of Sally, Bill and Olive. Enough could be cut, with explanations, to limit this to an hour.

2. *I Remember Mama*, by John van Druten.

This play, as in *The Glass Menagerie*, has a narrator. Does it seem necessary here, or does the narrator come between the audience and the play?

Describe the family, the lodger. Read the money-sorting scene, page 10-18; the appearance of the aunts, p. 25-38.

Dagmar's illness—Mama outwits the hospital authorities.

Character of Uncle Chris—He teaches Arne to swear, interviews Mr. Thorkelson, death scene.

Katrin—Episode of the brooch, the budding writer.

This play, too, is one to be acted or read rather than discussed. Give as many of the scenes, funny and touching, as time permits, not omitting Mama's humiliating confession regarding the bank account.

Additional Reading:

The Druid Circle; Mermaids Singing; Old Acquaintance; There's Always Juliet, by John van Druten.

DEEP ARE THE ROOTS—ANNA LUCASTA

Deep Are The Roots (of prejudice) was one of the most successful as well as controversial plays of 1945. It was a serious and intelligent attempt to deal with a timely subject, the imminent return to this country of Negro soldiers from foreign countries where they had been treated by the inhabitants on an equal and friendly footing, the color of their skins being of no importance.

In the play a young Negro, Brett Charles, returns from the wars to the Southern mansion in which he grew up, where his mother is the invaluable housekeeper. He is an officer who has been decorated, and in England was received as a guest in a middle-class white household. Grown accustomed to social equality, he finds the adjustment to back-home conditions not easy. The Southern family consists of an aged and decaying ex-Senator, embodying all the prejudices of the old South, his daughter Alice, who prides herself on her freedom from bigotry, but wants to help Brett—and boss him—on her own terms, and her young sister Ginevra, a sensitive outspoken girl. She and Brett had been childhood playmates, and her warm-hearted friendliness brings on the crisis of the play. Her father reacts violently, her sister's high-minded liberalism collapses, and Ginevra is driven into the impossible position of asking the colored boy to marry her to somehow atone for the sins her people have done his race. The romance is of course doomed, and no solution of the problems posed by the play is offered, but the whole subject is handled with great good taste, and, as one critic puts it, "Has the distinction of showing America to itself."

Anna Lucasta was presented with an all-Negro cast, but it was written primarily for Polish-Americans, and deals with a family and situation not peculiar to any one race. The acting was more warmly acclaimed than the play, and it gave Negroes a chance to show what excellent actors they can produce.

It is the tale of a beautiful girl thrown out of the house by her father because of a first misstep. She goes to Brooklyn and becomes a part-time worker, part-time street walker, with headquarters in the kindly Noah's bar. It is also the story of her family, composed partly of dubious crooks, willing to steal anything, and partly of nice simple people. At the advent of a well-heeled young sucker they plot to bring back the erring daughter, and keep the money in the family by marry-

ing them. Rudolf, the newcomer, proves to have a college education, and is not so dumb, but he and Anna fall in love at first meeting. They marry, but immediately after the ceremony Anna is confronted with her past, and, fearing Rudolf will find out about it, goes back to her old haunts.

The plot of the play is weak, but it is full of exciting people—Anna, whose charm shows through her defensive toughness and perversity; Frank, the bullying brother-in-law; the obstinate old father, who seems to be suffering from an Edipus complex in reverse; the floozy Blanche. These and other well-drawn characters put on a show in which humor and pathos are cleverly combined.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Deep Are the Roots*, by Arnaud d'Usseau and James Gow.

Describe the Langdon home, and characterize the Senator, Alice, Howard, Ginevra.

Homecoming of Brett Charles, and his reception by the various members of the household.

Outline the story of the play, reading illustrative passages of dialog.

Discuss Alice's tolerance. How much of it is genuine, and how much a pose? Does it seem possible to befriend the Negro without also patronizing him?

It has been said that pride, tradition, a sense of fitness, would have prevented the boy from accepting the evening's rendezvous with the white girl. Do you agree?

Does Ginevra's character, her final desperate stand, seem plausible? Which of the two seems more true to life?

Is the incident of the watch necessary, to discredit the Negro, or does it introduce too much melodrama into a serious problem play?

2. *Anna Lucasta*, by Philip Yordan.

Read the first scene, as an introduction to the play. If possible have different readers to take the various parts.

Describe Noah's bar, and the appearance of Eddy, Anna, Blanche, Danny.

Anna goes home. Read the scene between her and Rudolf, from page 90 to the end.

The story of Act III. When first presented, the play ended in the suicide of Anna. Does that seem more fitting than the amended happy ending?

Additional Reading:

Tomorrow the World, by James Gow and Arnaud d'Usseau.

On Whitman Avenue, by Maxine Wood.

CAROUSEL—ALLEGRO

Following up the success of their transformation of *Carmen* into the modern guise of *Carmen Jones*, our top musical team of Rodgers and Hammerstein have again adapted a foreign classic to the American scene. Ferenc Molnar's *Liliom* was the story of a tough, swaggering carnival barker in Hungary, who was led to the devil's gates by force of circumstance and his own wilfulness. He spent sixteen years in purgatory, and was then allowed a day back on earth to show his repentance by performing one kind act. In *Carousel* the authors have changed the setting to New England in 1873-88, and renamed most of the characters, but kept fairly close to Molnar's theme. The merry-go-round barker, Billy Bigelow, is both a swaggering philanderer and a shame-faced sentimentalist, who continually puts his worst foot forward, and maltreats his wife because he is afraid to show that he loves her. Fired from his job and in need of funds, he is cajoled into an attempted robbery and murder, only to commit suicide when trapped by the police. His later return to earth is furthered to give advice and encouragement to his unhappy young daughter, and whisper a few loving words to his wife.

The substitution of old-time American folksiness for a dashing continental fantasy is a bit incongruous, but it more than "comes off" in a charming operetta whose emphasis is not on comedy, but a wistful and touching tale of love and sorrow.

In *Allegro* Hammerstein and Rodgers have collaborated to produce a wholly original "musical play"—original both in theme and mode of presentation. It tells the story of Joseph Taylor, Jr., from the day he is born in 1905 to his thirty-fifth year. There is a chorus, but it is returned to its original Greek function of comment and interpretation. There is music and dancing, but the songs form a part of the narrative, and the ballets open spontaneously out of it. Primarily it is Joe's story, and he is shown taking his first steps, as a school boy, going to college, getting married and settling down in the home-town to practice medicine with his father. Unfortunately he made a poor choice of a wife, and is persuaded by her to accept a lucrative practice in a big city, catering to a particularly worthless set of wealthy idlers. Just in time he sees the error of his ways, renounces the big city, and returns to the little town for a more useful life among the people he knows and understands. This part of the play—its second Act—seems

fairly pedestrian, though Oscar Hammerstein takes pains to explain in a Preface that no general indictment of the rich, or city-versus-country, is intended. They are simply telling the story of one man's life.

Following the example of Thornton Wilder's *Our Town*, the play is acted with no scenery in its accepted sense. Against a background of bare stage, scenic changes and effects are produced with treadmills, curtains, colored slides, and a few props and pieces of furniture. This does not seem to have hampered it, as *Allegro* was enthusiastically received and enjoyed a long run.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Carousel*, by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers.

Tell the story of the play, interpolating records of the songs.

Read several of the scenes. Act I, Scene 2, and Act II, Scene 5, are suggested. Perhaps the scenes between Carrie and Enoch.

Discuss the characters of Julie, Billy Bigelow, Mrs. Mullin, Louise. Are they real people?

Is an authentic background of New England in the '70s presented?

Describe Molnar's *Liliom* and tell wherein *Carousel* resembles and differs from it. Which do you think is the stronger play?

2. *Allegro*, by Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers.

Read the first Act through page 14, with stage directions, to show method of presentation and function of the chorus.

The first part of the play is the comedy of growing up in America, told with tenderness and compassion. Illustrate this, and play the record "A Fellow Needs A Girl," the theme-song of the play.

Outline Act II. It amusingly satirizes a certain class of big-city doctors. Read the scene describing Jenny's cocktail party, page 109-120.

Do you agree with the critics who thought Act II a disappointment? What are the reasons for your opinion?

Read—or abridge—the Preface, stating the authors' defence.

At times the chorus reveals the thoughts of the actors, then again it comments, describes, or emphasizes. What do you think of this use of it? Illustrate.

Would you like to see it in other operettas, or is *Allegro* a *tour de force* which should not be repeated?

Additional Reading:

Carmen Jones, by Hammerstein and Rodgers.

Oklahoma, by Moss Hart and Richard Rodgers.

Liliom, by Ferenc Molnar.

THE GLASS MENAGERIE— A STREETCAR NAMED DESIRE

Thomas Lanier Williams was born in Mississippi in 1914. In his teens he moved to St. Louis, where his father was sales-manager in a shoe company. In high school he wrote poems and short stories, later at the Universities of Missouri and Iowa he turned to play writing, and adopted the name of "Tennessee" in honor of his Tennessee forebears. Since 1944, when *The Glass Menagerie* was first produced, Williams has come to be regarded as the most promising young playwright of the day. He has brought to the stage a new brand of pity, a feeling for evanescent moods and conditions, with emphasis on psychological peculiarities. The plot is secondary; dialog and characterization are of a high dramatic order. One criticism, however, must be levelled against him. In the two successful plays studied here, as well as in the short-lived *Summer and Smoke*, there is a sameness in the principal character—always a woman—and her background. Amanda in *The Glass Menagerie* sounds like Blanche of *Streetcar*, while Blanche is the final tragic realization of Alma, in *Summer and Smoke*. It remains to be seen whether Tennessee Williams can create fresh situations and peoples, or whether his strikingly original vein has run out.

The Glass Menagerie scored an instant and sensational success, in part due to the play itself, but also in part to the acting of Laurette Taylor, who gave a brilliant performance of sustained skill as the faded and bedraggled Southern belle. Grown old and domineering, she prattles endlessly of her feted delta girlhood, while trying to provide a gentleman caller for her crippled daughter Laura—a psychopathic, painfully shy and withdrawn, who lives in a dream world of her own and collects glass animals. The son Tom, sole support of the family, works in a warehouse, and has poetic yearnings. Yielding to his mother's incessant nagging, Tom brings home to supper a fellow worker, an easy-going extrovert, in whom Laura recognized the hero of her high school days. But alas, he is already bespoken, and all the mother's pathetic plotting comes to nothing. The play is at times bitterly comic, also human and touching. Tom sees no solution, so he follows in his father's footsteps and walks out on the family.

There is—or was—in the Vieux Carré of New Orleans a street car labeled "Desire." Blanche DuBois arrives by it one night, to visit her

young married sister. She is appalled by the miserable two-room apartment, and disgusted by her rough, brutish-looking brother-in-law, Stanley Kovaleski, but her sister Stella greets her affectionately, and welcomes her to the couch in the living-room. Blanche is a strange girl, though at first there seems nothing visibly wrong with her except a slight hysteria, which she tries to fight down with frequent surreptitious drinks of whisky. But the boorish Kovaleski—who is no fool—suspects the truth, and ruthlessly tears down her pretence of a gaudy, substitute past. The play, which starts in a low key, mounts slowly and inexorably to its shocking climax. The last scene presents with wonderful effect a mind desperately retreating into the beautiful crazy world it has built for a final refuge.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *The Glass Menagerie*, by Tennessee Williams.

Read the description of the four characters, and the first page of "Production Notes."

The play has been described as "fragile and poignant, vivid, eerie, curiously enchanting." It can best be understood through readings of the text, different readers taking the four parts.

The method of presentation, with Tom as narrator, has been criticized. It hardly seems necessary except at the end. How else could Tom's desertion be shown?

Mention that the mood of the play is sustained through atmospheric music, and the use of transparent curtains.

Are Amanda, Laura, Tom and Jim lifelike people? In varying degree? Or does it really matter?

Some of Tom's speeches, concerning world conditions, are out of place; but others show keen discernment. For instance, his diatribe against the movies, on page 76.

What are the best points about the play? The weakest?

2. *A Streetcar Named Desire*, by Tennessee Williams.

Set the mood of this play by reading the preliminary explanation to Scene One.

Describe Blanche's arrival, sister's greeting, the apartment, Stanley. Little by little Blanche's true character is revealed. Is she made "sympathetic," or only revolting?

Again we are presented with decayed Southern aristocracy, though Stella hardly seems to derive from such a background. Do you think the misfortunes Blanche has endured account for her disintegration, or was she doomed anyway?

Discuss Stanley's character. Would you have expected him to betray Blanche to his friend Mitch, or to have aided in her rehabilitation?

Read Scene Ten.

How does the play affect you? Do you think it has moments of greatness, or is its tremendous popularity due chiefly to its strangeness, and the shock of certain scenes? This has been called "a deeply disturbing play." Do you agree?

Additional Reading:

Summer and Smoke; American Blues; Five One-Act Plays; 27 Wagons Full of Cotton, and Other One-Act Plays; by Tennessee Williams.

BORN YESTERDAY—YEARS AGO

Born Yesterday, a melodramatic farce-comedy, deals with Harry Brock, an Al Capone of big industry who pushes people around. He started in a small way, stealing junk from a junk-yard and selling it back to the yard's owner, but in a short time he had made his pile, and was ready to bribe a senator, to further a scheme for swindling the government out of convertible steel. He moves in upon post-war Washington, settles himself and his entourage in a \$235-a-day hotel suite, and goes about his plans for buying himself some legislation.

With him comes blonde and beautiful Billie Dawn, ex-chorine, apparently as dumb as they make them, and perfectly happy, with two mink coats. Happy, that is, until she reads a book, and then another, and then several others, under the tutelage of a crusading young writer for *The New Republic*, who has been hired to smarten her up and make her socially presentable. He does such a good job of it that finally she turns on her gangster, and it is the bewildered and infuriated Brock who is given the works.

The play of course is not meant to be taken seriously, and yet it gets in some good cracks at the strong-arm methods which at times and places have prevailed in this country of ours. Legislators, too, are put on the spot, though we are probably safe in surmising that Senator Norval Hedges is a very rare specimen. The character of the illiterate rough-neck is sharply drawn, as he shouts his imperious commands, and throws his money around in a reckless expenditure tempered by an occasional suspicion that he is not getting his money's worth. Billie, his "broad," is almost pure farce, and the source and inspiration of most of the ribald wit that keeps the audience in an uproar. The play has been described as "good, mean fun."

Years Ago is the second successful play by an actress-turned-playwright. Ruth Gordon has for years occupied a high place on the American stage, appearing in such plays as *Seventeen*, *Clarence*, *Saturday's Children*, *Hotel Universe*, and *The Country Wife*. She is now married to Garson Kanin, the author of *Born Yesterday*, who directed both his own and his wife's plays in their first New York showing.

Years Ago is a New England period piece, embodying Ruth Gordon's reminiscences of family life a generation ago. The dining-room-sitting-room, its furnishings and decoration, even down to the maga-

zines, are shown in loving detail. The only child, a sixteen-year-old daughter, is possessed of a single-minded aspiration toward the stage. With everything in her inheritance and environment against her, she yet manages to get herself and her trunk out of the house and headed for New York and Broadway, with her father's mystified approval.

That is the play, but the principal character is not the girl, Ruth Gordon Jones, but her father, a one-time seaman, now factory employee, who epitomizes dreariness and frustration in a middle-class home. Since we know that Ruth did attain success in her chosen profession, another play would be welcome as a sequel, to show how she did it.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Born Yesterday*, by Garson Kanin.

Read the description of the opening scene, and Act I, through Billie's exit, page 12.

Continue with the story, interpolating some of the best scenes, such as that in which Brock tells Paul his life story; Billie and Mrs. Hedges; Billie and Paul, the gin rummy game, etc.

The play has been called another *Pygmalion*. Does Billie's acquisition of culture seem any more improbable than Eliza Doolittle's?

Do Ed Devery and Eddie Brock well illustrate the shabby, come-down-in-the-world hangers-on of such a creature as Harry Brock?

Is Paul Verrall a real person, or merely made to order to fit the exigencies of the plot?

This play has been running in New York for more than three years. Could this be explained by any intrinsic worth, or is it wholly due to clever lines and good acting?

2. *Years Ago*, by Ruth Gordon.

Describe the setting of the play, the father, mother, and daughter. How did Ruth feed her hopes of becoming an actress?

What are some of the touches that make the play authentic, such as the new telephone, physical education teacher, Castle Square Stock Company? (If anyone in your club lived near Boston in the early years of this century she can describe this, and John Craig too.)

Ruth gives little evidence of acting ability—only her stubborn determination could have carried her to success.

Although the father is the predominating character, do you think that the author drew on her imagination in portraying him, while the girl is pure autobiography?

Read some illustrative scenes, including stage descriptions.

THE WINSLOW BOY—EDWARD, MY SON

Two plays which have recently been brought over to this country after successful runs in England are ostensibly concerned with two sons, but in reality the actual principals are the fathers, alike in devotion to their boys, but poles apart in their conception and performance of the paternal role.

The Winslow Boy, by Terence Rattigan, is based on the Archer-Shee case, which caused a furor in England before the first World War. A fourteen-year-old cadet at an English naval school was expelled, without fair trial, for the alleged theft of a five-shilling money-order. It had become a national issue, involving the rights of private citizens against a despotic government, and was fought all the way up to the House of Commons. "Let Right Be Done," is the wording of the petition. In the play, convinced of the boy's innocence, his father wrecks health and fortune, sacrifices his older son's career and his daughter's engagement, to gain his day in court. He enlists the help of a cold courageous barrister, who turns down his own advancement for the winning of the Winslow case, convinced that it involved so much more than the clearing of a young boy's name.

No event of the long-continued case is actually shown in the play. The whole action takes place in the Winslow's drawing-room, and the story is cleverly developed through the personal reactions of the family and others most closely involved.

In *Edward, My Son*, the Edward of the title never even appears. His off-stage existence serves to create engrossing characters and situations, and to awaken in his father an over-weening paternal love which becomes ruthless in its development, and tragic in its effect on the boy. In burning his store to get money for an operation, thrusting aside old friends, brow-beating a schoolmaster, humiliating his wife to keep up appearances, buying off the girl Edward has seduced, the father becomes an evil and egotistical tyrant, constantly gaining in power and wealth, and not without a certain suave charm, in the midst of his villainy. The mother changes from a happy young matron to a disillusioned and slovenly dipsomaniac. Edward, of course, is utterly worthless, and only saved from complete ruin by an honorable death in World War II.

The English actor Robert Morley is co-author—with Noel Langley—of the play, and he gives a superb performance in the leading part, made-to-order for him. The play is well-written, and to see it acted is to realize the gulf which separates the best in cinema from a finely produced play.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *The Winslow Boy*, by Terence Rattigan.

This play has a brilliant first act, which Acts II-IV do not quite equal. Read Act I, with different readers to take the parts. Suspense is cleverly sustained, with Ronnie's first appearance, then withdrawal to the garden, his family unaware of his arrival.

Tell the story of the rest of the play, reading the interrogation of Ronnie by Sir Robert in Act II.

Explain the legal steps necessary to re-open the case. Try to imagine such a fight for justice being conducted in a totalitarian country.

Discuss the characters of Arthur Winslow, Sir Robert Morton, Catherine, Ronnie.

Are Catherine's suitors convincingly presented, or stock characters introduced to provide "love interest"?

2. *Edward, My Son*, by Robert Morley and Noel Langley.

Select scenes which will best illustrate Arnold's character in relation to his son.

Does it seem possible that a father could spoil his child with such utter unawareness of consequences? Or have you known parents who acted in just such a way?

Was the mother weak in her attempt to rescue Edward, or do you feel that she was powerless, under the somewhat hypnotic influence of Arnold's tyranny?

Do you like the device of Arnold's stepping down in front of the footlights, in Prologue and end of Act II, Scene I, in an interlocutor role?

Read the Prologue, and discuss its implications.

Additional Reading:

While the Sun Shines; Love In Idleness, by Terence Rattigan.

STATE OF THE UNION—DREAM GIRL

Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse form one of our most successful teams in the writing of sure-fire hits. Their most popular play to date has been *Life With Father*—and its sequel *Life With Mother*—in which Mr. Lindsay acts the part of the famous father. He has also been a play doctor, adviser, and manager, so that his knowledge of the American theatre is almost encyclopedic.

In *State of the Union* the collaborators have written an amusing satire about politics, that manages between laughs to get in some good-natured cracks at the way we choose our presidents, and also to say a few unflattering but truthful words about the voters.

An above-average political boss is considering an airplane manufacturer, Grant Matthews—a combination of Wendell Willkie and Henry J. Kaiser—as a possible candidate to get the Republican nomination for president in 1948. The play becomes a conflict between the honest man who wants to speak his mind, and the cautious trading that will win the votes. Matthews decides finally to say what he thinks, to tell off industry and labor when he has a mind to—and the party nomination is probably lost.

A theme secondary to the political maneuvering is the relationship of the presidential aspirant to his neglected wife, and the feud of the latter with a lady publisher who urges him into the arena at all costs. She warns the boss that he had better have an answer ready to a question that is on Grant's mind:

"Conover: An answer to what?

"Kay: Is there any real difference between the Democratic Party and the Republican Party?

"Conover: All the difference in the world. They're in—and we're out!"

A delightful comedy wholly lacking in any message is Elmer Rice's *Dream Girl*, an ingenious mingling of realism and fantasy. The bemused heroine is forever drifting back and forth from a reality she does not care to face to a dream girl of imaginary scenes, in which she plays the leading part. The girl herself is an appealing and likeable young spinster. The person she thinks she is, as she dreams up an amorous week end in Mexico, a trollop's fate, a pinch-hitting Portia who brings down the house, is a figure of high comedy.

We are with Georgina from 8 o'clock one morning till 4 the next, during which time she repeatedly encounters the three men in her life, a wishy-washy brother-in-law, a philandering book-jobber, and a blunt newspaper man. The latter finally jounces her out of her day dreams and elopes with her to Greenwich.

The stage transitions from dream world to reality are cleverly managed, with miniature sets rolled on and off on triple tracks, natural lighting for the real scenes, and blue lights for imaginary. The name role is a very taxing one, as the star is on the stage all the time, making instantaneous changes of both costumes and personality. Elmer Rice, an experienced playwright with many serious and powerful plays to his credit, wrote this unique *tour de force* for his wife, Betty Field, who gave a magnificent performance.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *State of the Union*, by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse.

Read the Foreword, by Thomas L. Stokes.

Tell the story of the play, reading portions which introduce and explain the leading characters.

Do Grant, Conover, and Mary seem wholly consistent in their speeches and actions?

Describe the dinner party in the last Act, and the "important personages" who attended it.

Discuss the handling of the serious message of the play. Would you define it as "Why do the people allow the politicians to choose our presidents?" Or, "Now that the war is over can't we work for world understanding and peace, instead of reverting to factionalism and strife?"

2. *Dream Girl*, by Elmer Rice.

Characterize Georgina—her background, job, associates, day-dreaming. The three men in her life.

Read Act I, to page 14; then entrance into the Bookshop, page 33-51.

Other readings must be left to the leader's discrimination, and time at her disposal.

If you are familiar with Moss Hart's *Lady in the Dark*, a comparison would be interesting.

Additional Reading:

Life With Father, by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse.

American Landscape; Counsellor-at-law; Flight to the West; A New Life, by Elmer Rice.

JOAN OF LORRAINE— ANNE OF THE THOUSAND DAYS

For more than twenty-five years Maxwell Anderson has been writing plays for the American stage—some of them as good as they come, others that were granted short shrift on Broadway. He has been called “simultaneously the most gratifying and disturbing playwright of any stature since O'Neill.” He is a crusader, imbued with a passionate urgency to impart his convictions to the audience. His object is never mere entertainment. At his best he shows observation and insight, irony and indignation. At his worst he indulges in long passages of dramatic poetry—high-flown, overstrained, excessive. As John Gassner describes it, “When Anderson reaches the heights he sometimes allows the rarefied atmosphere to unsteady him. It is then that he also becomes rhapsodically verbose . . . The Andersonian point is that the rats conquer and men are destroyed, but are transfigured by their heartening nobility.”

The plays here to be studied are two of his best, dealing with historical scenes and characters, wherein he excels, and couched in dialog of sterling worth.

Joan of Lorraine is a play about a play, wherein a group of actors are rehearsing a drama about Joan of Arc, trying to make it come alive. The star who is playing Joan, Mary Grey, felt that the real Joan would never compromise with evil by working with worldly and wicked men, while the director thinks that such compromises are sometimes necessary. In rehearsing the final scenes, she finds that Joan's ultimate, unswerving faith is the all-important thing, and that the rest doesn't matter.

The play is made-to-order for the screen actress Ingrid Bergman, who brought to the part of Joan—in both play and moving picture—a dedication which transcends the medium. Ingrid Bergman is Joan the Maid.

As shown in his earlier plays, *Elizabeth the Queen*, and *Mary of Scotland*, Anderson is happiest and most fluent when writing of Tudor times. In *Anne of the Thousand Days*, his latest offering, the grand manner of his Elizabethan prose, the Shakespearian soliloquies, are perfectly suited to the time and theme.

The story of ten gory years (1526-36) at the Tudor court of Henry VIII is told in scenes and flashbacks. It begins with Henry's infatuation for Anne Boleyn, though she was in love with Percy, Earl of Northumberland. She is helpless to resist Henry, but does have the strength to hold out for marriage, so that her child may be legitimate and inherit the throne. To quote Brooks Atkinson, "Two persons of fierce pride made the world pay for their love—made innocent people suffer, tore open the state of Europe, fought the church, drove good men to the executioner's axe and stirred hatred into love so that neither one could be separated from the other."

When Anne's second child—the all-important son—was born dead, and Henry tired of her, he offered her an easy way out, annulment of the marriage and exile with her daughter Elizabeth in Antwerp. But she would not give up her queenship, her baby's right to the succession. Henry has no alternative—since he must be rid of her—save to trump up the charges of adultery, which meant death on the scaffold.

There is a curious echo here of the Joan finale. The deep sincerity of Maxwell Anderson's way of thinking in both instances brings his heroine to a choice between a safe expediency and a fatal integrity. In neither case does the lady fail him.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Joan of Lorraine*, by Maxwell Anderson.

Describe the company assembled to rehearse the Joan play. Read the scene from Al's speech, page 6-10.

The play. Joan goes to Vaucouleurs. What do you think of the device of having her brothers tell how they would deliver the message, so that she may learn how a man would deliver it?

Read the scene between Mary and Masters, page 26-31.

Joan arrives at the court of the Dauphin. At Orleans.

Read Interlude IV; Act II, rehearsal preface.

The Coronation.

Read Interlude I, page 98-101.

The trial—The question—Joan answers.

Read from Interlude III to the end.

Discuss the form of play within play. Do the earthy remarks of the Manager and his assistants make a disturbing, or a welcome, contrast to the Joan story?

It has been said that some of the rehearsal scenes are actually the "better theatre" of the two.

Discuss the message of the play, the question of faith in modern times—the necessity of believing something and the difficulty of believing anything.

If possible see the moving picture, *Joan of Arc*, before studying the play.

2. *Anne of the Thousand Days*, by Maxwell Anderson.

Tell the story of the play, reading illustrative passages, including the Prologues, Epilogue, and Act III, Scene 5.

Characterize Anderson's Anne, Henry. How do they compare with the historians' estimate of them? Some of the latter make Anne weak and petty, and think there might have been some foundation for the charge of adultery.

The character of Elizabeth, their daughter, shows an inheritance of great strength. As Mary—Henry's and Katharine's daughter—showed little of it, a good deal of credit might be ascribed to the Boleyn ancestry.

Additional Reading:

Off Broadway: Essays About the Theatre, by Maxwell Anderson.

Plays by Maxwell Anderson:

Eleven Verse Plays, 1929-39; Both Your Houses; Candle in the Wind; High Tor; Key Largo; Knickerbocker Holiday; Mary of Scotland; The Masque of Kings; Saturday's Children; The Star-Wagon; Storm Operation; What Price Glory? The Wingless Victory.

FINIAN'S RAINBOW—BRIGADOON

The year 1947 will be memorable in theatrical annals for the appearance of two musical plays distinguished alike for their originality, charm, and popularity with the theatre-going public. Oddly enough, both derive their inspiration from the British Isles—Ireland and Scotland. They have definite plots, interspersed with music and dancing which are so much a part of the show that it is impossible to say where they leave off and the story begins.

In *Finian's Rainbow*, by E. Y. Harburg, a garrulous old Irishman has stolen a crock of gold from a leprechaun, and—having heard of Fort Knox—brings both crock and daughter to the mythical Southern state of Missitucky, with Og, the leprechaun, in pursuit. Much of the yarn has to do with the magical powers of the pot of gold, granting three wishes to those lucky enough to utter them above its hiding place. A dumb girl speaks, a bullying senator temporarily becomes black, while the miserable sharecroppers are turned into a happy folk, strutting in all the glory of their Shears and Robust catalog selections.

For all its gayety and fun, the play combines fantasy with fairly purposeful satire, and has been called "a musical with a social conscience, a message in its madness." Some of its songs have become permanent additions to American popular music: "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" "If This Isn't Love," and "Old Devil Moon."

Brigadoon, by Alan J. Lerner, is a Scotch idyll wherein two American boys on a holiday stumble into a quaint Scottish village called Brigadoon, on the morning of a fair and a day of a wedding. Although the place seems pleasant and hospitable, it also appears to be a strange anachronism, and finally the local dominie explains. In 1747, due to the efforts of a conscientious minister to keep witches out of the town, it had miraculously become a spectral village that only came to life one day out of each century. The Americans were privileged to witness the 1947 reincarnation, then given an opportunity to leave before Brigadoon vanished again into the mists. They went home to New York café society, but the spell of Brigadoon brings them back to the Highland forest.

The music has a traditional background of bagpipe skirling, with lively airs for country dancing. "Almost Like Being in Love" is the most popular song.

Of course the reading of such musical plays seems a poor substitute for seeing and hearing them, but the texts can stand up independently, and at least give indication of a new and welcome trend in American musical production.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *Finian's Rainbow*, by E. Y. Harburg.

Sketch in some detail the story of the "musical satire," playing records of the songs whenever they occur.

The play has been criticized for introducing a social problem into a fantasy of this character. Do you think this is a mistake, or have the two divergencies been harmoniously combined?

Discuss the leprechaun, his place in Irish mythology, and his introduction into the play.

2. *Brigadoon*, by Alan J. Lerner.

Tell the story of this "musical play," with an accompaniment of the songs.

Are the characters of the two Americans, Tommy Albright and Jeff Douglas, well differentiated? By their words, actions, or both?

Contrast Fiona MacLaren with Meg Brockie.

Does the killing of Harry Beaton seem shockingly incongruous, or do you accept it as in keeping with the dour Scotch background?

THE MAGNIFICENT YANKEE— DEATH OF A SALESMAN

The Magnificent Yankee, by Emmet Lavery, is a stage biography of Mr. Justice Holmes, from the time of his appointment to the Supreme Court in 1902, at the age of sixty-one, and arrival in Washington, to the day in 1933 when a newly inaugurated Franklin D. Roosevelt came to call on the famous old Republican, who all his life had been a "philosopher of democracy."

The play is episodic, with some scenes showing the great legal mind at work in shaping law to a changing civilization, others depicting a very human and charming gentleman from Boston, between whom and his wife a deep love and understanding existed. From the whole emerges a portrait of great breadth, dignity and feeling, with the actual words of the Justice forming an integral part of the dialog. Henry Adams, Owen Wister, and Justice Brandeis are pleasantly introduced, also the famous secretaries-for-a-year, cream of the Harvard Law School graduating classes, whom he treated as sons.

The Magnificent Yankee becomes a study of a portion of our history, exemplifying the greatness that is America which is capable of producing such men as Justice Holmes.

Death of a Salesman follows Arthur Miller's first theatrical success in 1947, *All My Sons*. He is hereby established as a highly gifted and promising young playwright, one who is chiefly interested in the sins and sorrows of the common man. He says, "I want to discover the ordinary man in the extreme of crisis."

Willy Loman has been a salesman all his life, a go-getter who believed in the personal angle, and that the line of talk was more important than the line of merchandise. His smile and his shoeshine had been his passport into any buyer's office, but now, at sixty-three, with smile worn thin and body gross, his world disintegrates. His job is gone, his nerve is going, his sons are mediocrities—the only prop left him is his loyal wife, and it is not enough. Suicide is his only refuge. Alas, America produces this type of man too.

The play has the unique distinction of being the first Broadway hit to be chosen by a major book club, a June selection for the Book of the Month Club.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *The Magnificent Yankee*, by Emmet Lavery.

Read the Foreword, by Arthur Hopkins, who produced and directed the play.

Summarize Holmes's life up to 1902.

Make your choice of scenes to be read. Act I, Scene 1; Act II, Scene 2 and 3; Act III, Scene 3, are suggested.

What picture do you get of the state of the Union during these years? Note that there is comment on politics, but no actual politics.

Is Holmes's character well drawn, as a man of wisdom and humanity, independence and profundity; or is there a little too much of sentiment and human emotions?

2. *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller.

Tell the story of Willy Loman, in success and failure.

Describe his wife and sons, and his effect upon them.

Does Arthur Miller succeed in presenting him as a sympathetic character, who should be pitied rather than condemned?

Discuss this quotation from a *Time Magazine* criticism: "At its very best *Death of a Salesman* confers a bifocal sense of simultaneously making you see what is and what could be—how completely needless are man's blunders, and how entirely inevitable. There especially lies the impressiveness of the play's attempt, touched as it is with the tragic sense of life."

Additional Reading:

Mr. Justice Holmes, by Francis Biddle.

Yankee From Olympus, by Catherine Bowen.

All My Sons, by Arthur Miller.

THE HEIRESS—LIGHT UP THE SKY

In passing through his native America in 1881, Henry James wrote a novel, *Washington Square*, from which a play, *The Heiress*, has been made by Ruth and Augustus Goetz. The play, a character study of a shy young girl, is a "period piece," with scene laid in New York City in the '50s. Catherine Sloper has an income of \$10,000 a year, and will inherit twice as much more on the death of her father, Dr. Sloper. She longs for love, but is a plain, pathetically awkward girl, never more conscious of her deficiencies than when in her father's company. He, indeed, is the chief villain of the piece, outwardly a kind and solicitous parent, but in reality resentful of his daughter, and tormented by the memory of his wife, a woman of charm and poise, who died in childbirth.

When an attractive ne'er-do-well, Morris Townsend, woos and wins the girl, her father tells her brutally of her plainness, and that she is sought only for her money. The suitor, fearing that Catherine will be cut off in her father's will, deserts her in the most heartless manner on the night of their planned elopement.

Two years later the father is dead, and Morris returns—penitent, eager, importunate—with plans for an immediate marriage. Catherine apparently responds, but the sufferings she has endured have changed her into a self-assured woman who in her turn can be cruel. When the crunch of carriage wheels is heard outside the stately mansion she has decided that it is her turn to do the jilting.

That old theatrical hand, Moss Hart, decided to lampoon his own profession—actors, producers, "angels," and even the innocent young dramatist—and came up with the maliciously entertaining satire, *Light Up the Sky*.

A group of Broadway theatrical people assemble in the Boston hotel suite of the leading lady, on the day of their opening performance in *The Time Is Now*. They include an emotional director, Narcissistic star, racy-tongued producer, together with a handful of spiteful-minded hangers-on and the pure-hearted author. Before the play opens they are overflowing with flamboyant love and devotion, certain that they are about to make theatrical history. After the performance, which they think must have been a flop because the audience laughed when they should have wept, they turn on each other in a furious

battle of invective, with no holds barred. But—Act III—the Boston critics' judgment was better than theirs! When the early-morning rave notices appeared they again fell on each others' necks, in mutual admiration and affection. The poor young author, after the most shattering disillusionment of his life, gets down to hard work in preparation for the New York opening.

Amusing as it all is, there yet are touches of sober comment, along with a certain sympathy for the people of the theatre. Plainly, Hart loves those whom he chastises.

SUBJECTS FOR STUDY

1. *The Heiress*, by Ruth and Augustus Goetz.

Read the description of the drawing-room setting.

Tell the story of the play, and sketch the leading characters—Catherine, Dr. Sloper, Aunt Lavinia, Morris Townsend.

Select scenes that will best bring out their characteristics, including Morris' proposal, Catherine's announcement to her father, Dr. Sloper's interview with Morris.

Discuss the aunt, as a foolish, well-meaning foil.

Read from Act II, Scene 2, to the end of the play.

Is Catherine's evolution, from youthful shyness to a mature self-assurance, convincingly shown?

2. *Light Up the Sky*, by Moss Hart.

Describe the people in the play and give a summary of Act I.

Read Acts II and III, with different readers taking the various parts.

If you think the characters are too much burlesqued, read Joseph Verner Reed's *The Curtain Falls*, the painful story of his theatrical experience, and draw your own conclusions.

Additional Reading:

American Novels and Stories, by Henry James, edited by F. O. Matthiessen (Contains *Washington Square*).

Six Plays, by George Kaufman and Moss Hart.

Winged Victory; the Army Air Forces Play, by Moss Hart.

The Curtain Falls, by Joseph Verner Reed.

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ADDRESSES OF PUBLISHERS

The following publishers have books listed in this outline, and opportunity is here taken to thank those who have generously given review copies of the books used and recommended.

Numerals indicate chapters in which the books are used.

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